Global Issues

The Informal Labours of Social Reproduction

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To Maria Mies, who in Narsapur discovered how the whole world works.

One must continue talking about labour in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, because the labouring poor have always been particularly exposed to health-related risks. This is because the labouring poor perform key reproductive roles in capitalism; indeed, across the world, low-paid informal labourers and care workers are those who, at present, seem unable to withdraw their labour to shield themselves and their families from the potential deadly consequences of the coronavirus. Together with health workers, they are literally sustaining our lives during the pandemic. The health-depleting effects of working poverty have always been obvious in the Global South. Now, they are also increasingly obvious in the Global North. Here, I celebrate the *Global Labour Journal's* tenth anniversary by discussing how the study of labour dynamics of the Global South can significantly contribute to our broader understanding of global capitalism across the world. After all, as underlined by Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden (2014), it is clear by now that the "West" is following the "Rest" when it comes to rising rates of labour informalisation, which has become the "mode of employment" at a global level. In fact, the very representation of the so-called Western labour trajectory has always been somewhat biased – over-representing the experience of a handful of core countries within the Western bloc and a (male) labour aristocracy within highly differentiated working classes. Ultimately, capitalism has only ever been "Golden" for a very few, in a very few places, and during a very few years.

The progressive pace of labour informalisation is remarkable, and suggests that this is how work manifests itself in the twenty-first century. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018), 85.8 per cent of total employment in Africa, 71.4 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, 68.6 per cent in the Arab States and 53.8 per cent in the Americas is either informal (based in the informal economy) or informalised (situated within formal production but based on informal relations). Total informal employment for the whole emerging and developing economies bloc is set at 69.6 per cent and, given the weight of this bloc and the extension of processes of precarisation across the whole Global North, it is 61.2 per cent at world level. In short, our entire planet primarily labours *informally*.[1]

If by refocusing our attention on the Global South much can be learned about how the world labours, a good deal can also be understood with regard to the *mechanisms* of exploitation and labour surplus extraction. In particular, the study of the informal and informalised labour relations across the Global South reveals that exploitation can indeed take many distinct "forms" (Banaji, 2010) where, for instance, the wage relation may be direct or "disguised" – like in the

[1] Informalisation in former Soviet bloc countries is documented by Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese (2015).

case of the impoverished self-employed who, hardly entrepreneurs, should instead be considered as a "class of labour" (Bernstein, 2010). It also reveals how realms of social reproduction co-constitute the dynamics of exploitation observed in production, as they co-produce the key processes necessary to extract labour surplus from labouring masses, and hence co-participate to the overall generation of (surplus) value. In short, the study of the concrete world of work confirms the relevance of Marxian Feminist analyses framed around social reproduction.

Fifty years ago, following the launch of the World Employment Programme (WES) in 1969, Maria Mies completed her seminal study of women home-based workers in Andra Pradesh, India, whose patterns of work and reproduction would inspire all her theorisation on the relation between patriarchy and global capitalist accumulation. Mies' (1982) study of the *Lace Makers of Narsapur*, who produced intricate laces for the world market from their peri-urban and rural homes, explores the features of *housewifisation* – the process whereby the devaluation of women's reproductive labour inside the household sets the basis for their disadvantage in paid employment outside it. Obviously, this process is highly racialised – as is capitalism as a whole (Bhattachharyya, 2018) – with important differences in the appropriation and devaluation of women's work between working-class housewives, the object of Mies' study in India, black women slaves or women indentured workers (Mies, 1986). For black women slaves, as documented by Rhoda Reddock (1984), housewifisation was considerably delayed, as initially these women were denied any right to domesticity, including childbearing, considered an unnecessary cost by the slave-master. Angela Y. Davis (1983) documents a similar process with reference to settler colonialism in the United States (US). Also, the masterful gendered analysis of labour indenture by Gaiutra Bahadur (2014) highlights the violent regimes of appropriation of women's labour across productive and reproductive domains at work in plantations, which not only devalued but also objectified the woman both at work and at home.

Crucially, for women, housewifisation is far more than a mere double-burden; it is a dynamic process of double-devaluation of women's social and economic contribution to capital. In fact, in the same period that Maria Mies was writing about Narsapur, the dynamic nature of women's reproductive contributions to capitalism was the subject and object of a fierce debate by Marxist Feminists over the nature of capitalism and the social boundaries of its processes of exploitation and value generation. This debate, known as the *housework debate*, unveiled the ideological constructs behind the exclusion of women's reproductive activities from processes of value generation (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Fortunati, 1981; Federici, 2004; 2012; Hensman, 2011), and their mischaracterisation by classical political economists as realms of non-value (Picchio, 1992). Focusing his critique of political economy on the classics like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, unsurprisingly Karl Marx also primarily circumscribed his analysis to realms of commodity production (Rioux, 2015), hence overlooking the production of the most precious commodity of all – namely, labour power and its "container", the worker (Federici, 2004; see also Bhattacharya, 2017).

Despite its main focus on domestic and sex work, the housework debate was an important theoretical intervention on how to account for the crucial role of wagelessness within capitalism (e.g. Denning, 2010). This is an important theoretical exercise, needed not only to recuperate a history of women's capitalist exploitation, but also that of the millions of enslaved, unfree and/or coerced people whose labouring has always fallen outside the paid tyranny of the direct wage relation, relegated by too many theories to "the outside" of capitalist value generation processes. The escalating rise in estimates of informal employment and the continued regeneration of processes of labour informalisation worldwide shows the great contemporary relevance of the early housework debate and its analytical and political intuition. In fact, the concrete analysis of

informal labour across the globe reveals the key relevance that social reproductive realms and activities play in processes of labour surplus extraction and exploitation. Reproduction is, at once, a site of labour re-generation as well as the foundation of exploitation.

As I argue elsewhere (Mezzadri, 2019), there are three channels through which social reproductive realms and activities directly shape the process of labour surplus extraction, effectively expanding exploitation rates and hence directly participating in capitalist value generation. The first channel is shaped across the many dormitories, industrial hamlets and urban enclaves where the global industrial proletariat sleep and rest before going back to the thankless working rhythms of the capitalist assembly line. While in some places, like China, the dormitory is a mammoth infrastructure resembling a prison-like barrack – shaping the whole labour regime in its own image (Pun and Smith, 2007) – in other places the dormitory is more like an informal housing arrangement inextricably embedded in local industrial labour relations. Ultimately, the labour regime is always "dormitory" (Burawoy, 1985), in the sense that the housing arrangements of the industrial labour force are always central to and co-constitutive of the work relations characterising a specific sector and locale. Obviously, then, these arrangements may vary on the basis of distinct histories of colonial and contemporary exploitation. Quite tellingly, for instance, in India the industrial proletariat often lives in urban slums and informal settlements that are still organised according to colonial plantation lines, as is the case in Kapashera, connected to the industrial areas of Gurugram (formerly Gurgaon) and Manesar (see Figure 1; see also Cowan, 2018).

Source: Picture taken by the author in September 2019.

Figure 1. The dormitory "lines" of Kapashera, recalling the old colonial plantation lines

The symbiotic connection between realms of production and daily reproduction ensures workers can be continuously recalled into the assembly line – in contexts where overtime is the norm (Mezzadri, 2017) – besides turning them into ever more compliant labouring subjects (Schling, 2017).

The second channel through which social reproduction directly co-constitutes value is through the role of intergenerational reproductive realms in absorbing employers' externalisation of social costs, like the villages of origin "releasing" migrant labour to urban hubs. This process is fuelled by labour circulations, which are multiple and entail urban–rural movements, continuous industrial redeployment and early exit from the industrial army (Mezzadri, 2019). It works as a direct subsidy to capital. In short, employers can pay their workforces significantly less for considerable periods of time as workers' "homes" reabsorb them during lean seasons, leisure and non-work time, collective or individual health emergencies (never socialised by employers), or following retrenchment, exhaustion or final withdrawal from industrial labour. The extreme dynamism of these processes is well captured by the numbers of circulation. Urban–rural circulatory movements alone are set at 300 million people in China (Chen and Fan, 2018) and 150 million in India (Breman, 2013). Notably, in the schema I am proposing, the village/household re-absorbing and regenerating the workers and the labour power they provide performs the same role – albeit in a significantly scaled-up version – that housework performed in the early social reproduction debate, where it was theorised as subsiding the (male) wage.

Finally, a third channel through which social reproduction co-constitutes value is represented by the endemic presence, across the world, of processes of formal subsumption of labour – namely, homeworkers, who are primarily albeit not only women. Returning to Maria Mies' brilliant initial intuition, the homeworker testifies not only to the ways in which processes of labour devaluation cut across private and public spheres, regenerating social oppression and boosting exploitation. She also literally embodies the impossibility of dis-extricating productive and reproductive activities, realms and contributions in order to assess what "makes" or does not make labour surplus. It is certainly the case that in labour market or time surveys it is challenging to neatly separate productive and reproductive time for this category of workers, as they often entirely overlap. Indeed, whenever I encountered women garment homeworkers, they laboured on the batch of clothes provided by the contractor while cooking, cleaning or caring for their children or the elderly, all in the single space of their own dwelling.

The acknowledgement of the invisible, *informal labours performed by social reproduction* is not merely a theoretical exercise. On the contrary, it is crucial for the way in which we can understand and rethink labour policy and labour politics in the age of global labour informalisation, spread across the Global South, but also increasingly so in the Global North, due to the precarious labour relations shaped by the gig economy and platform capitalism (Rani and Furrer, 2020). In fact, the current COVID-19 pandemic is very likely to further boost informalisation rates by multiplying new forms of "smart" homeworking, while also creating novel health-related hazards for the many who cannot afford to labour while staying indoors. This further escalates the need to rethink a labour policy able to sustain an ever more diversified labouring class whose working and reproductive times, needs and risks may increasingly overlap.

Once the reproductive aspects of labouring are fully recognised as central to the labour relation, one can lobby for the inclusion of many measures in support of workers and their families in a cohesive labour policy agenda where the focus on wages and work-related social security can be complemented by direct provisions on housing and living arrangements. Instead, these issues are treated separately in policy priorities. Notwithstanding the need to defend welfare

state provisions against processes of neo-liberalisation, policies such as "basic income" (or self-determination income, as many feminists have called it for a long time), national employment guarantee schemes, or living wage social floors could finally become parts of a holistic labour policy package considering all the different productive and reproductive aspects of labour informality, rather than being assessed as competing policies. This would also further extend the mandate and reach of labour organisations, including the ILO, which has progressively lost its regulatory power within the United Nations system, *de facto* turning into a research and statistics body (Van der Linden, 2019).

Moreover, and more crucially, blurring the separation between productive and reproductive realms – which may intersect or co-constitute in manifold ways depending on typologies of work, labouring subjects and geographies – will enable us to expand the social perimeters of solidarity, and unite reproductive struggles and labour struggles. While a segment of social reproduction theorists are rightly becoming inspired by the struggles waged by teachers or health workers, who across the United States have engaged in a large number of strikes and mobilisations (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019; Ferguson, 2019), we need to pay as much attention to other forms of reproductive struggles characterising the world of work, particularly in the Global South. Besides those led by workers in *societal* reproductive sectors, as in the case of US teachers' strikes, other forms of reproductive struggles are those waged by "reproductive workers" engaged in classic reproductive activities like domestic or sex work (Mac and Smith, 2018; Blackett, 2019), or workers organising around reproductive demands like housing (Makhulu, 2015). Other reproductive struggles include: those erupting in reproductive realms like dormitories, which are turning into cradles of resistance in countries like China (Pun and Smith, 2007); those waged by the labouring poor over class recognition (Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001); and those on migrant workers (Choudry and Hlatshwayo, 2020). Obviously, combining productive and reproductive struggles may entail rethinking and transforming the tools of struggle – the features of mobilisations or labour actions. For instance, as argued by the NiUnaMenos Argentinian activist Veronica Gago (2018), in order to achieve a new labour politics founded upon inclusiveness, we need to reclaim the strike and make it a *feminist strike*, not only to accommodate women, but everyone. We need to revolutionise and expand its meanings and tools to include actions not traditionally part of working-class imagination. In Gago's words:

> The strike appropriated by the women's movement is literally *overflowed:* it must account for multiple labor realities that escape the borders of waged and unionized work, that question the limits between productive and reproductive labor, formal and informal labor, remunerated and free tasks, between migrant and national labor, between the employed and the unemployed. The strike taken up by the women's movement directly targets a central element of the capitalist system: the sexual and colonial division of labor (Gago, 2018: n.p.).

The massive worldwide mobilisations we recently saw around the feminist strike may have temporarily subsided during the pandemic. However, due to its highly unequal impact, the pandemic itself remains filled with calls to strike (Cavallero and Gago, 2020). In fact, concluding this brief intervention during the COVID-19 Global Lockdown, one can further appreciate and underline the need to rethink and challenge unnecessary analytical and political divisions within the working class, and acknowledge all the many, distinct labouring subjects contributing to the capitalist design across productive and reproductive sectors and realms. As the world of work faces unprecedented challenges, with the likely loss of 195 million jobs (ILO, 2020), the conflation of productive and reproductive time accelerated by the pandemic – economically

deadly for many – has clearly revealed the socially constructed nature of the separation between production and reproduction, paid and life-sustaining work (Mezzadri, 2020). Arguably, the pandemic has also revealed the key truth under capitalism – that all value, starting from the very regeneration of life, is entirely dependent upon human labour, in all its diverse, productive and reproductive forms. Never before has the "hidden abode" appeared in such plain sight, loudly calling for new, more inclusive tools for resistance.

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